

Shame is an Exposure

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ABSTRACT

Julia Kristeva defines the abject as having “only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.”¹ It is precisely this space, wherein meaning is made through its own collapse, which has driven my exploration of the human condition. The *I* and the *Other*, the *Inside* and *Outside* are concerns for exploration of the question, *Where am I?*

Through the exploration of photography and sculpture installation, using found objects, abject narratives spring into surreal life in a magic sort of realism. These works bear witness to uncanny, abstracted, spaces highlighting real human pathos, and vulnerability. Constructed out of discarded boxes, paper, hair, and any variety of found objects these sculptures and photographs depict stripped down abject narratives. Figures and architecture are democratized and the boxes are not just stages for telling a story but have become equated within the narrative.

These puppet figures were deliberately assembled to be constructs, dead to life and inanimate but made of the familiar and arranged in an identifiably pathetic way. Whether tied together, falling over decapitated, being exposed, having a balloon head literally filled with air, or appearing flaccidly drunk these puppets promise vulnerable and embarrassing stories. What is more embarrassing than making a desperate fool of oneself amongst others by delivering an uninvited confession? What is more abject than being confronted with one's own humanness in the most self-effacing way? How can that feeling be narrated - the kind of heat that flushes one's cheeks at the horror of wetting oneself in public or falling over drunk in a sober room or exposing the desperation of loneliness at a socially inappropriate time? Pathos, loneliness, the ability to be repulsive to self and others – is not generally shared as a party topic. Exposure of the abject self most often happens in trust or by accident; I am interested in the accidents.

¹ Julia Kristeva. Powers of Horror. (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 3.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee, Alison Norlen, Tim Nowlan, and Graham Fowler, for their direction in the completion of this thesis. I would like to note a few special acknowledgements, the first is Alison Norlen for her generous insight and sincere interest; it was a rare pleasure working with her. And the second is Milutin Gubash for his acute understanding of this work and his dedication in to high academic standards which challenged me to reach deeper and farther. I would also like to thank the Mendel Art Gallery for framing selections of this thesis exhibition. And thank you also to Lissa Robinson for her insight into my practice and encouragement to take significant risks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
THESIS – SHAME IS AN EXPOSURE.....	1

Shame is an Exposure

Tiffany Smith

Everything human is pathetic. The secret source of Humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven.

Mark Twain, U.S. author. *Following the Equator*, ch. 10 (1897)

If everything human is pathetic, being a kind of sorrow packaged in humor, then I am fascinated with making artwork about the human condition that breeches pathos and hilarity. I propose to trace my motivation and research that have coalesced to create this thesis exhibition, *shame is an exposure*, to contemporary discourse regarding abject art. The motivation behind this exhibition seats itself in narratives excorsizing my own neurosis regarding intimacy, exposure, and shame. Through the exploration of photography and sculpture installation, using found objects, abject narratives spring into surreal life in a magic sort of realism. These works bear witness to uncanny, abstracted, spaces highlighting real human pathos, and vulnerability.

It is important to note that my previous training and initial trajectory in this program was in narrative figurative painting. This painting background is important for a few reasons. Firstly, my training developed me as an image-maker, which is why photography became a natural second step. Secondly, painting exposed me to a treasury of visual storytelling skills. There are two significant threads connecting my painting practice with this thesis work, the first being a fascination of believability, or realness, in image confronted with the unreal or fantastic, not unlike the magic sort of realism which occurs in Terry Gilliam's films. The second thread traces narratives confronting otherness in every day suburban life, as told through images of house parties, middle class socials, and domestic scenes. These concerns were expressed through a number of painted self-portraits in which I was interpolated into found snapshots of "strangers," from images culled from the internet or albums purchased at estate sales and flea markets. There occurred a simultaneous connect and disconnect between the characters and myself in the image. I was not in the original photograph, their time or culture, but recreated a moment in paint and through my hand I was placing them, or rather a fantasy of them, in my time.

In essence I was attempting to confront the fallacy of a photograph having any ability to tell the ‘truth’ about a particular moment and exposing that kind of sentimentality as fantasy. After all, a photograph can be argued to have no more or less ‘truth’ than any other form of representation. Photos are images frozen in time with a horizon limited to a particular vantage point.

Although interest in a type of magic realism was beginning to take shape conceptually I was not satisfied that it translated into the work in an effective visual way. For instance, the work grew too literal in that my physical self was placed within the scene in near seamless accompaniment with the activity in the frame making it difficult for a viewer to discern my intention. The fantastic was not fantastic enough to read visually without a textual prologue, the execution of the work was too rigid, and it was the photos I was initially engaged with anyway. It was particularly interplay of media through interpretation and recreation of the source images that held the most interest - hence the choice to pursue photography and installation to distill my ideas (figure 1).



Figure 1
Tiffany Smith
Christmas at my house, 1972
2003

Also of note, albeit related by default related to my current thesis work, was my painting research focusing, in part, on early French modernism. Painter Gustave Caillebotte shared a kindred urban narrative describing the isolated middle class self and relative detachment to others and one’s environment. His paintings encapsulated a kind of photo aesthetic, avante garde for its time, often depicting banal scenes of lower and middle class people detached from each other and their environment. His images displayed a lonely kind of urban struggle and an underlying sense of tension (Figure 2).



Figure 2
Gustave Caillebotte
Paris: a Rainy day
1877

I felt a radical shift was needed to bring my practice into sharper focus. I was not satisfied that my intentions were fully realized in painting and decided to open up other media possibilities

because my ideas were attainable. In switching media to installation and photography and using the same motivations for artmaking and skills learned as a painter, my thesis work exploded with creative vigor and endless possibilities for creative expression. The photos included in this exhibition grew from a series of shoots set up in my basement where life sized ramshackle puppets were assembled and arranged in party and group situations. A deliberate choice was made in their assemblage to use household, domestic, and commonly understood items in unusual ways to evoke a kind of human gesture and personality. Rather than taking strangers' images and painting myself into them I was now making my own strangers, my own Others, evocative of humanity but very obviously not human. This kind of assemblage and confrontation of "urban debris" made into a beautiful photograph is a typically a surrealist agency. "It was Breton and other Surrealists who invented the secondhand store as a temple of the vanguard taste and upgraded visits to flea markets into a mode of aesthetic pilgrimage. The Surrealist ragpicker's acuity was directed to finding beautiful what other people found ugly or without interest and relevance – bric-a-brac, naïve or pop objects, urban debris."²

These puppet figures were deliberately assembled to be constructs, dead to life and inanimate but made of the familiar and arranged in an identifiably pathetic way. They expose a touching vulnerability in gesture, assemblage, and context of their placement in both the installations and the photographs. This vulnerability is explored as a larger metaphor not about a phobia of being exposed but rather the potentiality of it. Whether tied together, falling over decapitated, being exposed, having a balloon head literally

² Susan Sontag, On Photography. (New York: Picador. 1977) 79.

filled with air, or appearing flaccidly drunk these puppets promise vulnerable and embarrassing stories. What is more embarrassing than making a desperate fool of oneself amongst others by delivering an uninvited confession? What is more abject than being confronted with one's own humanness in the most self-effacing way? How can that feeling be narrated - the kind of heat that flushes one's cheeks at the horror of wetting oneself in public or falling over drunk in a sober room or exposing the desperation of loneliness at a socially inappropriate time? Pathos, loneliness, the ability to be repulsive to self and others – is not generally shared as a party topic. Exposure of the abject self most often happens in trust or by accident; I am interested in the accidents.

Julia Kristeva defines the abject as having “only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.”³ It is precisely this space, wherein meaning is made through its own collapse, which has driven my exploration of the human condition. The *I* and the *Other*, the *Inside* and *Outside* are concerns for exploration of the question, *Where am I?* This theory of abjection draws from two key elements: a blurring of self and other, and the notion of “base materialism.” The concept of “base materialism” was introduced by the Surrealist writer Georges Bataille, “[and] challenges dominant concepts of mind/body dualism and our established categories of social taboos through an investigation of degraded elements.”⁴ Further delineation comes from Julia Kristeva who describes the individual who recognizes, and exists within, the abject as an exile.

The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places (himself), separates (himself) situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. Situationist in a sense, and not without laughter – since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection. Necessarily dichotomous, somewhat Manichaeic, he divides excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections, is not at all unaware of them. Often, moreover he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations.

³ Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 3.

⁴ Simon Taylor. *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*. (New York: Whitney Museum, 1991) 7.

Instead of sounding himself as to his “being,” he does so concerning his place: “*Where* am I?” instead of “*Who* am I?” For the space that engrosses the *deject*, the excluded, is never one, nor homogeneous, nor totalizable, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic.⁵

My own performance in the photos, most notably the large color images, disrupts the fantasy from being one sent into a purely othered world to being one confronted with the self/non-other as disrupted by my own body. My body presents a breakdown of meaning in the image - Other and I are confused, in a hinterland with no clear space to sit. The question of *Where am I* is forever masticated as meaning morphs from the ‘real’ to the phantasmatic. Are the puppets mimicking the self or is the self mimicking the puppet? These large color images are beautiful and seductive from afar and as one approaches them a fantastic tableaux of ambiguously gendered bodies, surrogate bodies, borderline pornographic suggestions, monsters, repugnant faux body fluids, and deformed anatomies appear. By virtue of their large scale and expressive fetishism, and taboo subject matter, many of these images threaten to exceed the frame by materializing vision.

Domestic spaces evocative of family rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, and bathrooms propose a stage for the question of *Where am I*? The familiar is interrupted by the fantastic and surreal. A particular psychological space is created with the use of voyeuristic camera angles, attention to architecture, and arrangement of the puppets. The puppet figures are recognizable in a space that is “real” and manifest human gesture and narrative that sits in an absurdish kind of nightmare. A psychology of tension is created through the suggestion of violence in both the assemblage of the figures and their relationship to their environment in a deliberate nod to filmic *mise-en-scène*.⁶ Memorable cinema images are evoked when looking at the Nutella series, one may be reminded of a particular Hitchcock scene wherein the frame is composed at an extreme or expressly voyeuristic angle highlighting the viewer’s consumption and the subjects inherent vulnerability within the frame. There is a humor stirring in both the photographs and the sculpture installations that requires a recognition of cinematic tropes particular to

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 8.

⁶ *Mise-en-scène* was termed by André Brezen in 1929. It is a filmic devise coined for narrative orchestrated via depth of field, lighting, and overall composition within one image frame. Cook, David. *A History of Narrative Film: Third Edition*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, NY. 1996. P. 178

suspense and horror genres. This particular series quotes the cinematography of Hitchcock as well as the candid relationship oriented photography of Nan Goldin in a type of sarcastic caricature (figure 3).



Figure 3
Tiffany Smith
Nutella (head off in bed)
Black and White photograph
2004

Alfred Hitchcock
Psycho (screen capture)
1960

Due to the theatrical, obviously staged, and psycho-dramatic nature of my work the periphery of my research has included naturalist theatre, most notably the theatre of the Grand Guignol, developed by the director Andre Antoine. Abject artists such as Cindy Sherman, Paul McCarthy, and Kiki Smith, to name a few, share certain interests specific to the abject spectacle as pioneered by this early French theatre. Grand Guignol translates into “Large Puppet” in English and the theatre’s main thematic is the human monster as told through grotesque and abject means. Plays are often so horrific and shocking that on staff physicians would attend to fainting and anxiety stricken patrons. This theatre is of note in regards to my thesis work in a number of ways. The first way is my works fascination with the shadowy, “threatening,” and “monstrous” spaces in the human condition. The second way is the intensely exploitive aesthetic sensibility the theatre carried.⁷ Stories climaxed with a variety of violence such as beheadings, amputations, poisonings, and even sexual violations through the use of obviously constructed props, dummies, and puppets. Even though patrons enter knowing that the play is fantasy, it so deeply engages their fascination and appetite to see the repulsive and horrifying that the theatre thrived in Paris from 1867 until the early 1960’s.

⁷ Michael Wilson. Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror. (Devon: Exeter UP, 2002) 23.

Both the theater and my thesis exhibition make histrionic spectacles of events and experiences humanly abhorred. Yet the emphasis on heightened graphic violence is where this theatre and my photos part company. My photographs locate a subtlety wherein a type of violence is suggested, a party may be going on but there will be tension emanating from an ominous figure or even an oblique camera angle, that slightly puts the viewer at unease having to question what is really occurring through visual clues. Figures can be isolated, falling apart, or seemingly conversing but there is an awkwardness, confession, and tension in the image. As in *Nutella* (head off in bed), one is not sure if the photograph has been taken before or after the climax of an activity. The Hitchcock like angle, in addition to the photograph's patina on warm toned paper, give it a particular laughable unease like a film noir still or a crime photo. A head has fallen off, there are dark smears on the wall, there is an open jar of Nutella on the night table, and now the gesture of one half-clad pillow animates the whole bed with the question if anything else will come to life (figure 3). Like a lover turning to their partner and asking, "is that it," these black and white photographs immediately invite humor but quickly counterpoint with an acknowledgment of pathetic failure.

Like Cindy Sherman's *Sex and Horror* series of *Untitled Film Stills*, much of my photographic work uses narrative form of children's media. There are elements in both the sculpture installations and the photographs that conjure memories of puppet programs like *HR Pufnstuf* and *Sigmund and the Sea Monsters*. The work also engages childhood fancy and imaginary worlds arise out of arbitrary items like boxes, blankets, food and toys. This kind of attention to the fantastic, a kind of domestic fairy tale combined with aesthetic sensibility of childlike fantasy – offers a space wherein the inanimate breaks into life telling horrible stories in an uncannily bizarre way. Sherman locates her own combination of narrative and aesthetic in morbid fantasy.

In horror stories or in fairy tales, the fascination with the morbid is also, at least for me, a way to prepare for the unthinkable.... That's why it's very important for me to show the artificiality of it all, because the real horrors of the world are unmatchable, and they're too profound. It's much easier to absorb – to be entertained by it, but also to let it affect you psychologically – if it's done in a fake, humorous, artificial way.⁸

⁸ *Twenty Years of Cindy Sherman*. Cindy Sherman: Retrospective. Amanda Cruz. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003) 5.

Cindy Sherman's self as other photograph, *Untitled Film Still #175*, is a chaotic snapshot of the aftermath of an abjected event. Imaged are cupcakes, chewed food, a beach towel, soda crackers, beach sand, trampled cookies, vomit, and a pair of sunglasses reflecting an image of a distraught feminine character located outside the frame. (figure 4) This particular image denies the stereotypically positive associations of films with beach parties, bathing beauties, picnics, and sunny seashores. Instead this image locates a narrative in Goyaesque, or something close to Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Sherman's series of *Untitled Film Stills* are of particular note, in relation to my own work, in their appropriation of media's forms in order to critique it. From visual quotations of cinema, sitcoms, advertising, and art history there is no end of media to stage this theatre of the absurd and the exploration of abjection through the breakdown of I and Other. "These images mine the comedic potential of the grotesque in a way that is never really terrifying but that succeeds in mirroring and mocking a collective set of artistic conventions about the dark side of human nature."⁹ This is perhaps where the strongest kinship exists between Sherman's work and my own. "Her use of the fairy tale and the horror film as sources to be parodied, her ebulliently stagey renditions of such scenes" and her "reprisal of them... manifest a tongue-in-cheek sensibility that commingles pleasure and disgust."¹⁰

The dioramas and sculptures in this thesis exhibition were borne of the same conceptual fiber as the photographs. I wanted the experience of the sets I was photographing and performing in to be experienced in some kind of kinesthetic or "real time" way for the viewer. The sculptures can be loosely identified as dioramas and share certain points of the photography's aestheticism. This is shown in the surrealist use of materials, the composition of visual quotations from painting, and reference to time based media such as photography and film.

⁹*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. Cindy Sherman: Retrospective. Elizabeth A.T. Smith. (New York, Thames & Hudson, 2003) 23.

¹⁰ Smith 20.



Figure 4
Tiffany Smith
Untitled (kitchen party), 2004



Cindy Sherman
Untitled (film still #175), 1987

Constructed out of discarded boxes, paper, hair, and any variety of found objects these sculptures depict stripped down object narratives. Figures and architecture are democratized and the boxes are not just stages for telling a story but have become equated within the narrative. In *great western basement beer box dreams*, the simultaneous simplicity of material and complexity of reading as a narrative ready-made create the pinnacle of object experience within this exhibition. The beer box is walled with plastic mactac wood paneling, handmade dangling light fixture, faux marble floor, and cut out circular window that offers a view to a magazine image of a Hawaiian paradise. This construct creates a simultaneous rejection of craft as well as an acceptance of it. This sculpture, made out of waste, connects with memories of drinking, basements, and dreaming of being somewhere other than “where” one is. The fantasy of a paradise is pathetically exposed as vain desire through the ripped out magazine image taped to the wall behind.

As in photographs, which can be explained as memory triggers, these sculptures explore notions of gaze and the tension between constructed fantasy and pathetic reality. In looking at an old photo album, the photos seen are simply objects patching into a memory sketch in the person beholding the object. The moment presented in a photograph has past and in essence, is dead, and the living image in one’s imagination, upon interpreting it, is an unrealized desire only existing in fantasy. These dioramas function similarly to my photographs in that they are aesthetically assembled of reclaimed objects, testify to the constructed image, and bear witness to memory like an old family photo might in their composition and associations with domestic narrative.

Basements, kitchens, bedrooms, hallways, and closets are explored as sites of memory and abjection. Like one reads a photo and associates experienced time to reconstruct its meaning, so these dioramas make similar quotations on time, memory, and the simultaneous breakdown of both. A beer box is a basement; a basement is a milk carton; a milk carton is a closet; a closet is a cracker; a cracker is a stereoscope; a stereoscope is a stain on the floor; a stain on the floor is a smell; a smell is a memory; memory is self. These sculptures are constructed with the efficiency of minimal media positing profound, poignant, tales and pathetic portraits. The repulsive is made familiar and the ugly made beautiful when a beer box can speak volumes about the human condition. The self is seen in these sculptures in a kind of pathetic fallacy, be it through the gestalt of a lone figure in a corner of a milk carton or in a particular gesture of embarrassment held by a seven foot giant with garbage bag pants; one is brought to humor only to be countersunk with pity.



Figure 5
Tiffany Smith
great western beer box basement dreams
2005

These works more closely resemble self-portraits in their description of my own neurosis regarding intimacy, exposure, and shame. Can one be repulsive and poignant? This is what makes the human experience so unfortunate - the inherent inability to be located, desirable, and honest while simultaneously being identified with the abject. Confronting self is like confronting a corpse; *I* am confused at what *I* see because of abject identity. *I* am relegated to ask again *Where am I* and *is This it?*